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# Joseph W. Alton Jr., first Arundel County executive

Anne Arundel County executive was ensnared in the political corruption scandals in the 1970s that swept Maryland

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2:56 p.m. EDT, April 3, 2013

Joseph W. Alton Jr., who served as the first Anne Arundel County executive and whose political career ended at the jailhouse door, died Friday of complications from **dementia** at **Genesis** Eldercare Spa Creek Center. He was 94.

"Joe was probably the most influential political figure in modern Anne Arundel County history, and that was largely due to his leadership in transforming the county from commission to charter government," said Robert R. Neall, who was elected county executive in 1990 and was a longtime friend.

"He believed in civil rights and public accommodation at a time in Maryland when that wasn't too popular. He had another dimension," said Mr. Neall. "He was a very shy person and had a wonderful empathy for his fellow man. He knew how to connect with the common man, and he raised that to an art form. In other words, he had the common touch."

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The son of the county sheriff and a homemaker, Joseph Walter Alton Jr. was born and raised in **Annapolis**, where he graduated from Annapolis High School.

After leaving high school, Mr. Alton went to work for his father as a deputy at the jail in Annapolis.

When his father died in 1950, Mr. Alton ran for the job and won. He served as sheriff for 12 years.

"For the longest time when I was running for sheriff," Mr. Alton told The Baltimore Sun in a 1975 profile, "I'd win bigger than everyone else, but it just didn't occur to me to run for something big."

In 1953, Mr. Alton was considering a bid for the state Senate seat held by Louis N. Phipps Sr., the Anne Arundel County Democratic boss "whose word was law," reported the newspaper.

Mr. Alton was viewed as "a maverick Republican in a county in which the GOP meant something like 'Godforsaken Outcast Party," observed The Sun. "Mr. Alton won elections which, by all rules of thumb, he should have lost, just as his father, a Republican sheriff before him, had won."

He challenged Mr. Phipps in 1960 and lost. Two years later, Mr. Phipps stepped aside after winning the primary when he ran instead for clerk of the Circuit Court.

Mr. Alton ran — and won by his narrowest margin ever.

"It was my whole life — winning," Mr. Alton told The Sun. "From the time I went into the Senate, I just wanted to do that."

"In order to write the law that created charter government, he had to serve in the Senate to do it," recalled Mr. Neall. "He took on a lot of entrenched interests that ran the county when under the commission form of government."

Mr. Alton took on the eight commissioners who essentially carved up Anne Arundel County into eight fieldoms. He also fought for the abolition of slot machines.

In 1964, county voters approved the charter government plan that Mr. Alton had played an enormous role in shaping. He was sworn

in as the county's first executive on Feb. 1, 1965.

"He transformed the Anne Arundel into a modern county government where the executive prepared budgets and had control over public works, zoning and planning," said Mr. Neall. "Before that, Anne Arundel County was run like a banana republic."

The federal corruption probe in 1973 that claimed Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and **Baltimore County**Executive Dale Anderson began looking at Mr. Alton, who admitted publicly that he took cash from consultants

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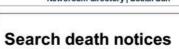
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whom he helped win county contracts.

In April 1974, Mr. Alton told The Sun, "I feel I should stand up and say, step by step, what I've done."

In November 1974, he was charged in federal court with conspiracy to commit extortion for attempting to get \$36,000 in kickbacks from engineering firms, architects, surveyors and others seeking county contracts.

A month later, he pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court and was sentenced to 18 months and served seven months at the Allenwood federal prison camp in Allenwood, Pa., until being paroled in September 1975.

"All of the money I ever received went into either my campaigns or for the dozens of other candidates I helped finance," he said at the time. "The fact that I was careful not to allow my political activities to adversely affect the operation of government cannot alter the fact that some of these activities were excessive and in violation of the law."

When Mr. Alton was sentenced, he told Judge Herbert F. Murray, "I have no one to blame for these difficulties but myself."

Mr. Neall said that more than 1,500 people showed up to wish Mr. Alton well the night before he departed for prison.

"That doesn't happen to too many politicians," said Mr. Neall.

"It was an expression from people for the many things he had done. The number of people he helped along the way is unaccountable," he said. "Joe was unique, but he was not without his faults, and he did take responsibility and the medicine for what he had done."

At Allenwood, Mr. Alton busied himself exercising, jogging, planting flowers and building rock gardens.

"It was not an unhappy experience for me, partly because of my attitude when I went in, but most people there are extremely miserable," he told The Sun in a 1980 interview.

After leaving prison, Mr. Alton, who did not return to politics but remained a sort of an elder statesman in county politics, retained his personal popularity.

In the intervening years, he built houses and managed properties.

Mr. Alton enjoyed "building things," family members said, as well as running and old cars.

He was a member of Calvary United Methodist Church in Annapolis.

At his request, there will be no funeral services.

Mr. Alton died two days after his son, Joseph W. Alton III, 64, an Anne Arundel County personnel analyst, died of a heart attack.

He is survived by his daughter, Marsha J. Alton of Eastport; a sister, Mary Smith of Ajo, Ariz.; four grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren. His three marriages ended in divorce.

Baltimore Sun librarian Samuel Savin contributed research to this article.

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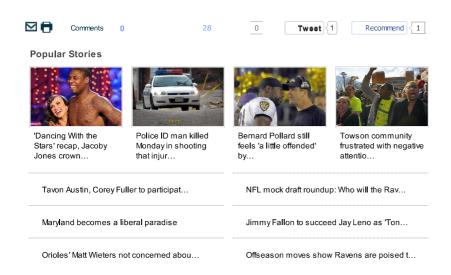
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